



## SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 5  
Proper 10 (C)**

### **An Alternative Consciousness**

**[RCL] Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37**

Flashing through the Bible and beyond is a lightning bolt known as prophetic ministry. What prophetic ministry does, according to Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, is generate “a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” This is not a small order.

Whatever the dominant culture happens to be in a particular place and time, prophetic ministry comes along and overturns the apple cart by promoting an alternative consciousness, a different way to see the world. This biblical witness to the God of life, when faithfully accepted, proves too hot for any dominant culture to control.

Today let’s investigate three instances of prophetic ministry and the alternative consciousness it generates. The first comes from the prophet Amos. Another is found in a story Jesus tells, one of his best-known parables. The third instance of prophetic ministry and alternative consciousness appears whenever we celebrate the Eucharist together.

Amos the prophet is the figure behind the brief Old Testament book that bears his name. He was a herdsman and field hand who lived more than seven hundred years before Jesus. While not the earliest of the biblical prophets, he is the first whose name goes with a book entirely concerned with his life and message; we know nothing of him from any other source.

Today we heard perhaps the most memorable passage from the book of Amos. The prophet sees the Lord standing beside a wall, and in the Lord’s hand, there is a plumbline. A plumbline is a cord that has attached to it a weight, known as a plumb weight. Simply put, a plumbline functions as a level, but in a vertical way. It is used to ensure that a structure is built right. This presupposes the grim possibility that a structure can be built wrong.

So, in the vision of Amos, the Lord, holding a plumbline, denounces his people because they do not measure up. They are built wrong. There’s a divine standard of righteous dealing which differs from both royal decree and popular opinion. The nation and its rulers and its populace do not meet this standard.

The movers and the shakers in the kingdom where Amos lives understand what he is saying. Amaziah, chaplain at the royal sanctuary, wants Amos to get out and prophesy somewhere else, *anywhere* else. His plumbline prophecy is not welcome there at the royal sanctuary because it subordinates the status quo to a God of justice.

In the time of Amos, many nations treated their kings as divine and beyond criticism. A transformative assertion of prophetic ministry, part of the alternative consciousness it generates, is that *those in high office come under the judgment of God*. God is king; the king is not God.

This challenging claim runs from the time of Amos, seven centuries before Christ, to the English Magna Carta some two thousand years later, to the American Revolution more than five centuries after that. In our time, it provides a basis for human rights around the world.

Jesus provides us with another instance of prophetic ministry when he tells the story known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

In today's gospel, we hear that he presents this story in response to a question put to him. A lawyer recognizes the obligation to love his neighbor as himself if eternal life is to be his. But the lawyer then asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

Throughout the course of the Bible and beyond, God's people come to learn—they discover through experience—that their God is God of all nations and peoples. The living Lord reigns everywhere; the Holy One is concerned with all places, not just some places.

In a similar fashion, God's people learn not to take the word "neighbor" in too narrow, too literal a way. Neighbors are not only the people nearby; they include people everywhere.

And so, Jesus tells his story of the enemy Samaritan who cares for the assaulted Jew and thus proves himself a neighbor to that unfortunate victim.

Here we come to another transformative assertion of prophetic ministry, a second part of the alternative consciousness it evokes, namely that *our neighbors include absolutely everyone*, all those created in God's image and likeness. It matters not whether they are near at hand or far away. It matters not whether we share their ethnicity, nationality, religion, skin color, social class, or political principles. Because they are God's children, we must recognize them as our sisters and brothers. No exceptions.

During the Second World War, the German Army occupied a small Greek island. The leading figure in the community there was the local Orthodox bishop. So, the German commander demanded of the bishop a list of all Jews resident on the island. The bishop took paper and pen, wrote down a single name, and thrust the paper at the commander. The name the bishop had written was his own.

So, what happens at the altar when, no matter how often, in obedience to Christ's command we celebrate the Holy Eucharist?

How does this ritual pattern bring us to an alternative consciousness, one that challenges the dominant culture and enables us to see our existence in a different way?

Consider these lines from the poet William Wordsworth: “The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”

We may find this true of ourselves. The world’s way, limited to getting and spending, wastes our powers and brings no renewal. The altar teaches us a different economy.

There the inexhaustible gift of Christ our God becomes available to us through faith. His Body and Blood are for us his people a sharing in his unconquerable life.

The Eucharist is all about giving: Christ’s giving and ours in response. Christ offers himself once and always. By the Spirit’s power, we share in that giving, that complete and perfect sacrifice. In union with Christ crucified, risen, and triumphant, we offer to the Holy One the entirety of ourselves and all creation. No longer weary and wasted, we become people of the resurrection.

Thus, we learn a new way of sharing where abundance prevails: all who eat and drink receive the entire Christ. We do not stand contrary to each other; instead, we indwell one another, participants in the restored Christ.

Thus, we see past the dominant culture and its real brokenness to the deeper truth, the union of all in Christ. We practice our giving and receiving and rejoicing after the ceaseless example of the Trinity.

So then, the plumbline of Amos reveals how those both high and low cannot escape the judgment of God, for the dimensions of what we build together must be mercy and justice and good faith.

The Samaritan in the story Jesus tells shows us who is our neighbor: everyone without exception; and that Christ is the foremost Samaritan overcoming every barrier we build.

Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we are initiated into the wholesome order where gifts are received and given, divine abundance refreshes us again, and tragic brokenness yields to deeper truth.

Count all these and more as ways of prophetic ministry. They build in us an alternative consciousness that confounds the dominant culture.

Prophetic ministry does not simply imply that the tomb of Jesus became empty; it casts a light forward on the ways that we, included anew in Christ, can go out from this assembly to overcome the world, to practice resurrection.

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